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The Perspectives of Reverse Transfer Students at Two-Year Technical Colleges

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The Perspectives of Reverse Transfer Students at Two-Year Technical Colleges

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Education

AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

2012

MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION
AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Project** of


Ross A. Brower

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education degree.

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This is dedicated to my daughter

Thank you for your inspiration

.

With special thanks to

my wife for your patience and understanding,

Elizabeth Ankeny for your support and hard work,

and Vicki Olson for your guidance and motivation

ABSTRACT

The Perspectives of Reverse Transfer Students at Two-Year Technical Colleges

Ross A. Brower

April 12th, 2012

Action Research Project

Reverse transfer students begin at a four-year college then transfer to a two-year college. Two-year technical colleges provide career-based education to students for employment in specific trades. The perspectives of seven successful reverse transfer students attending a two-year technical college were obtained through in-depth interviews to understand the nature of reverse transferring to a technical college, the reasons for their success, and the lessons that can be learned for students and colleges. From the data five themes emerged: the participants were all successful high school students; they did not adequately select their first college; they held common beliefs about the role of higher education; their ability to connect with other students, staff, and the school impacted their success. Furthermore, findings indicated that they benefitted from the transfer itself: maturing over time; reflecting on their own preferences; and gaining experience outside of the classroom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Purpose Statement.....	2
Importance of the Study.....	2
Literature Review	5
Overview.....	5
College Success and the Role of Vocational Schools.....	8
The Undergraduate Reverse Transfer Student	12
Justification for Accepting Undergraduate Reverse Transfer Students	15
Methodology.....	19
Setting	20
Participants.....	21
Blake	21
Anthony	23
John.....	24
Donald.....	26
Eva	27
Joseph.....	28
Tommy.....	28
Analysis of Data.....	29
Findings	31
High School Performance	31
Common Beliefs about the Role of Higher Education	35
Trivial Reasons for Selecting a College and a Degree.....	37
Time, Reflection, and Experience.....	40
Connections with the School	43
Conclusions and Recommendations	47
Overview of the Study	47
Conclusions.....	48

Recommendations.....	55
Limitations of the Study	61
Self-Reflection	63
References.....	65

Introduction

I became aware of reverse transferring soon after I started teaching developmental math at a small, private two-year technical college in the Midwest. I'll refer to this school by the pseudonym Midwestern Technical College (MTC). I would frequently have students in my class who either had attended or were currently attending a four-year school. The number of reverse transfer students was not great. I never have had more than one or two students a quarter who had reverse transferred. However, to someone who has never even heard of the phenomenon, this was frequent. Amazingly, the reverse transfer students consistently ended up being my best students, even those who had failed out of their four-year school. This was counterintuitive to me because I believed that past performance of students would be a predictor of future performance. I started to worry that I had some bias towards students who had attended a four-year school like me.

As I grew in my role within the developmental education department, I took on the management and training of the college's peer tutors. I once again was surprised by the prevalence of reverse transfer students. Some years nine out of ten tutors would be reverse transfer students. This is when I realized that it was not just in my class. School wide, the top performing students were consistently reverse transfer students. While I was responsible for hiring the tutors, I relied on the recommendation of the tutors' instructors to vouch for their abilities. Also, I only found out about their reverse transfer status after hiring the students. During the required training I would ask the tutors about their academic past as an ice

breaker. It became clear to me that this did not represent my own bias or the bias of my colleagues. Other factors were at play. I wanted to know everything I could about reverse transfer students.

Purpose Statement

This paper will analyze the perspectives of students who reverse transfer from a four-year college to a two-year technical college. The study will attempt to answer four questions about reverse transfer students.

1. Why do students reverse transfer to technical colleges?
2. Why are reverse transfer students successful at a two-year technical college?
3. What can the experiences of reverse transfer students teach other students, especially at-risk students?
4. What lessons can two-year and four-year colleges take away from the experiences of reverse transfer students?

Importance of the Study

College attendance has become nearly ubiquitous in this country, especially four-year schools. Eighty nine percent of graduating seniors planned on attending a four-year college in 2004 (Rosenbaum, Stephan, and Rosenbaum, 2010). As a teacher in higher education and the recipient of a four-year degree, I understand why large numbers of students wish to attend college. I believe that learning is at the core of who we are as human beings. In addition, I have received gainful employment as a direct result of my education. More students attending college is something that I support. However, despite the modern trend

of student-focused environments and a greater emphasis on retention by schools, retention rates have not significantly improved. Nationally less than 50% of first time college students graduate with an associate's or Bachelor's degree in 6 years (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005). Attending multiple institutions is common. Peter and Forrest Cataldi (2005) found as many as 40% of first time college students eventually attended more than one school. Despite colleges' best efforts, students are still transferring schools and dropping out altogether. While some schools might be able to improve their ability to retain and graduate students, it is unlikely that schools will ever be able to abolish attrition entirely.

Retention and graduation are two separate goals that must not be confused. It might be argued that retention leads to graduation, but possibly at the expense of the student. Retention is motivated by an individual college's desire to secure tuition dollars. It is widely believed that retaining a student is easier and cheaper than replacing a student who drops. Earning a degree or at the very least a sufficient amount skills to get a job is the goal of many students. If changing schools increases a student's ability to graduate, the issue of attrition becomes secondary. Changing schools may also lead to students finding a more satisfying program or a degree that is more likely to lead to a job.

It seems counterintuitive, however, that switching from a four-year to a two-year college could increase ones likelihood for better employment or a higher paying job. The assumption is that every four-year degree is superior to every two-year degree. This is not always the case. One-quarter of students with a four-year degree earn less than those with a two-year degree (Baum, Ma, and

Payea, 2010). This implies that in fact a student could increase earning potential by reverse transferring. Also, the comparison is only valid if the reverse transfer student would have graduated from his or her first college. This seems unlikely given that most students experience difficulties before withdrawing (Hillman, Lum, & Hossler, 2008), implying that reverse transferring could increase earning potential because the alternative is no college degree.

Two-year vocational colleges seem uniquely able to support reverse transfer students. By transferring, students will spend more time in school (Light and Strayer, 2004). Because of this transferring to a school that offers a degree or certificate in two years or less could help mitigate some of the negative impacts. And unlike the degrees from non-vocational two-year colleges, which are usually designed to transfer to a four-year liberal arts college, vocational school's curriculum prepares students for employment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics many of those with bachelor's degrees obtain a job but do not use their degree or work at a level that requires a bachelor's degree (Khim, 2011). Understanding the experiences of reverse transfer students who enroll at a two-year technical college could help inform other students at four-year colleges who are struggling or dissatisfied. Reverse transfer students may also help inform students who graduate with a bachelor's degree and are looking for a career change.

Literature Review

Overview

The broadest definition of a reverse transfer student is any student who takes a class at a two-year college after taking classes at a four-year school. Two-year colleges include community colleges offering academic based associate degrees, transfer curriculum, and vocational education; two year colleges also include vocational or technical schools which are often private schools offering associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates in specific career related skills.

Reverse transferring is contrary to the traditional role of two-year colleges as a feeder for four-year colleges. Close analysis reveals that reverse transfer students fall into one of three types: temporary reverse transfer students, undergraduate reverse transfer students, and post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students (Townsend, 2000; Yang, 2006). Temporary reverse transfer students, also called co-enrolled students, take classes at a two-year college while still enrolled at a four-year college or leave the 4-year school for a few months and then return. A student may temporarily reverse transfer to take generals at a community college during the summer and transfer the credits back to his or her 4-year college.

Undergraduate reverse transfer students drop out of a four-year college and enroll at a two-year college. Students who enroll at a two-year school after graduating with a bachelor's degree are known as post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students.

It is likely that students have been reverse transferring since the advent of the two-year colleges. Studies observing the phenomenon date back to at least the 1960s. By most accounts the trend is increasing (Townsend, 2000; McCormick,

2003; Yang, 2006). Because research on reverse transfer students has been sporadic at best, the increase in frequency could be due to an increased awareness. The increase in reverse transfers could also be correlated to the increasing pressure to earn a four-year degree (Rosenbaum, Stephan, and Rosenbaum, 2010). Despite this pressure, a bachelor programs is not suitable for all students. High attrition rates and reverse transfers are possibly a side effect. Two-year colleges have reverse transfer populations that range from 3% to 65% with most institutions having 10% to 20% (Townsend, 2000; Yang, 2006; Hillman, Lum, & Hossler, 2008).

Given the broad definition of reverse transfer students, such high rates are not completely surprising. Hillman, Lum, and Hossler (2008) specifically examined undergraduate reverse transfer students by looking at over 90,000 first time freshman enrolled in Indiana's public four-year colleges from 2000 and 2001. From the 2000 freshman cohort 3.9% and from the 2001 freshman cohort 4.7% transferred to a two-year college during their sophomore year. Despite the large number of students in this study the values are likely to fluctuate from year to year and state to state. Only examining students between the first and second year was a limitation. While most attrition happens within the first two years, a longer view is required to see the true numbers of students who reverse transfer. McCormick and Carroll (1997) found that the average student spent 12.5 months at his or her first institution before withdrawing and then took an average of 9.1 months off before reenrolling. The reverse transfer may happen most frequently between the second and third years of college.

Peter and Forrest Cataldi (2005) looked at transfer habits over a longer period of time. In an analysis of students beginning at a four-year institution in 1995-96, they found that 38 percent attended more than one institution within six years. This included 18 percent of students who attended a two-year school. Of the students starting at a four-year school, an Associate's degree was the highest degree completed for 13 percent of the students within six years. This means a large number of reverse transfer students are successfully completing a two-year degree, and not simply temporarily transferring. Jacobson and Mokher (2009) found that 6 percent of all four-year students completed an associate degree in 6 years. This could signal a change in the students' goals or a realization that the two-year college was a better fit. Much of the existing literature is very critical of any transfer, and views reverse transferring as a lowering of goals.

Two-year colleges are seen as dissuading students from pursuing a bachelor's degree through testing, remedial courses, counseling, and probation. The effect is that two-year colleges steer students towards two-year and vocational degrees and away from more prestigious and in some cases more lucrative four-year degrees (Dougherty, 1994). The assumption is students who enroll in vocational programs are not achieving their full potential, and they would be better off attending a four-year school. The natural conclusion is that most, if not all, students should first attend a four-year school to avoid this effect. The fact that reverse transferring still happens in this modern climate where more students than ever before are encouraged to enroll at a four-year college demonstrates that the issue is far more complex. Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and

Person (2006) found that this process called cooling out may not be as prevalent as it once was and points out the harmful effects of concealing a student's true chances of completing a four-year degree. Instead, Rosenbaum et. al found evidence that two-year colleges, even vocational schools, have the effect of warming students up to four year degrees through providing support, increasing confidence, and actively encouraging students to transfer to a four year degree. Therefore, reverse transfer students might not represent a decrease in ambition. Instead, reverse transfer students may be drawn to the warming up qualities of two-year colleges.

College Success and the Role of Vocational Schools

A large number of studies have been commissioned to examine the attrition and retention of college students. The reasons students leave a college and the factors that cause them to stay is very valuable information to an institution. Most of the existing research focuses on four-year colleges and universities. Because these institutions are predominately comprised of traditional students between the ages of 18 and 24 who live on or near campus, students' level of social integration has been identified as a primary factor to attrition and retention (Tinto, 1987). Such research has led schools to be more student-focused and provide opportunities for students to connect with the school, the staff, the faculty, and other students.

The retention models for students enrolled in two-year community and technical colleges vary because students typically commute and are more likely to be a non-traditional age, 25 or older. Social integration plays a smaller role

because students are on campus less and have more obligations outside of school. Offering courses at convenient times, reaching out to students' spouses, and providing daycare are the factors that improve retention at two-year colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). Learning communities and interactive classrooms are also important to students at community and technical colleges (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Tinto, 1997). Because the classroom provides the only potential for student-to-student connections at a two-year college, organizing students into groups takes the place of the social integration activities at a four-year college.

Graduating is not necessarily the goal for students at two-year colleges, especially in career focused education, nor is graduation necessary to see economic benefits (Light & Sayer, 2004). Students who complete approximately one year of credits at a community or technical college see increased job opportunities and increased wages (Prince, 2008; Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Grubb, 2002). The greatest benefit does come to those students who complete an Associate's Degree, a diploma, or a certificate. The potential for increased tuition income and corresponding benefits for students still motivates two-year colleges to retain students through graduation.

Because success is not necessarily defined by graduation, schools can get creative in the ways they serve students. Two-year colleges have responded to the college-for-all trend by having open enrollment policies. For this reason two-year colleges attract a large number of low skilled and at-risk students. Unfortunately, students who require remediation persist and graduate at far lower rates than

students who do not require remediation (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006; Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007).

Prince (2008) studied a program out of Washington State that attempted to address this problem in a creative way. Instead of attempting to increase the retention of students, the program attempts to give students as much college level vocational training as possible. The idea is novel and goes against the traditional efforts of college retention. Despite Tinto's landmark study in 1987 and the resulting shift in higher education to focus on the retention of students, retention rates have not increased significantly. The two-year colleges in Washington combine remedial courses with vocational classes to get low-skilled students one year's worth of non-remedial credits faster. Their program has been very successful at improving and upgrading the skills of the current labor market, especially considering the fact that students can spend up to a year taking only remedial classes at other two-year colleges (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006).

Career based education is a very effective way to boost the earning potential of at risk students including students with low high school GPAs or low socioeconomic status (Kemple, 2008; Prince, 2008; Jacobson & Mokher, 2009). For this reason two-year vocational colleges play a unique role in higher education. Students enroll in a career-based school for very different reasons than a two-year community college. While community colleges have traditionally prepared students to transfer to a four-year school, students attend a vocational college to gain employment in a specific skilled industry. This focus on career

specific training has boosted the earning potential of students in vocational programs as opposed to those in academic programs who receive little to no boost in earnings (Jacobson & Mokher, 2009). Increasing earning potential is not necessarily an explicit goal of a community college preparing students for a four-year degree; however, money and a job are certainly on the minds of students.

Increasingly, students are viewing college, especially two-year schools, as a means to a job (Cox, 2003). This has started a shift in higher education at all levels. Colleges in the United States are focusing more on vocational training (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). Many two-year colleges, even those that have traditionally been stepping-stones to four-year degrees, are offering career-based education. This growth is fueled by the need for skilled workers and the demand of students for an education that can be immediately applied at a job. However, more is needed of schools than simply offering vocational programs.

Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) examined the differences between two-year public and two-year private institutions offering vocational programs. Private schools have a better track record of retaining and graduating students. First, private schools eliminate class choice and map out all of the classes for an entire two-year program. Students know what their schedule will be from term to term and can plan accordingly. Students also do not need to worry about missing a required class or registering for the wrong class. Second, private two-year colleges provide ample counseling and monitoring to help students avoid mistakes and intervene when issues arise. Third, private colleges form strong connections within the industries for which they train. This insures

the programs are relevant and state of the art. This also insures that not only the retention and graduation rates are high but the job placement rate is high as well. Because of the vastly different approaches of private and public two-year schools, the experiences of reverse transfer students could be different. However, no distinction is made in the literature on reverse transfer students between the two institution types.

The Undergraduate Reverse Transfer Student

While a great deal is known about why college students choose to persist or withdraw, very little is known about the student who then chooses to re-enroll at a community or technical college. Studying retention seems largely motivated by the desire of individual institutions to retain tuition dollars and does not seem to have what is best for the student in mind. Granted, students who graduate reap far more benefit than students who drop. However, less than 40 to 50 percent of first time college students earn a degree within 6 years (Bailey and Alfonso, 2005; Peter and Forrest Cataldi, 2005). This low rate of success is in spite of the modern student focused environment. Instead of figuring out how to keep students at one college, greater efforts should be made to get more students to graduation. At the very least greater efforts should be made to provide students with enough skills to improve earning potential. Understanding more about undergraduate reverse transfer students may meet this goal.

Winter, Harris, and Ziegler (2001) surveyed 885 reverse transfer students in the state of Kentucky to determine the goals and factors associated with undergraduate as compared to post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students. This

study found that undergraduate reverse transfer students are motivated by earning an associate degree; completing credits to transfer; improving their GPA; and improving basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. This implies that students are attending two-year colleges before completing a bachelor degree because they struggled at the four-year level or they changed their goals from a bachelor's degree to an associate's degree. Undergraduate reverse transfer students are either ill prepared to perform at the level required by four-year colleges, or they do not fully know what they want from higher education or how best to obtain their goals. Post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students are motivated by factors of improving skills for a current job and acquiring new skill for a career change. A school with a vocational mission and a shortened time table could best meet the needs of post-baccalaureate students and explains why many of the students attend a two-year college. This could also represent a shift from the need to explore areas of interest that is more beneficial for young and inexperienced students to a more practical approach for older and experienced students.

Intuitively, undergraduate reverse transfer students very often experience academic challenges at the four-year level. Reverse transfer students are more likely to have graduated in the bottom half of their high school class, and on average they leave with a GPA of 2.0 or less (Hillman, Lum, & Hossler, 2008). This corresponds with the desire of students to improve basic skills and increase their GPA. This data implies that too many students are enrolling at four-year colleges who are academically underprepared. However, this may be a narrow

interpretation because even students who have graduated with bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees return to two-year colleges. Windham & Perkins (2000) found as much as 2% of the students at community and technical colleges have advanced degrees. This suggests that two-year colleges have something different to offer than simply preparing students for a four-year college.

Transferring from a four-year to a two-year school before graduation could also suggest that students lack a clear vision of what they want from an education. Students yet to declare a major are more likely to reverse transfer compare to students in any degree program (Hillman, Lum, & Hossler, 2008). Transferring may be an effort to find the best fit of a school and program. This is an expensive and time-consuming way to explore education. Two-year institutions get students into a degree program faster because of the shorter time frame, very often within the first two quarters. For some student this concentrated focus is a better fit than the exploratory, reflective nature of traditional liberal art four-year schools. This focus could be especially important for students who reverse transfer to a technical college. If the student's goal for education is employment, being able to see the connection between school and a job would be important.

Socioeconomic status also plays a role in the likelihood of a student to reverse transfer. On average community and technical colleges are cheaper overall and on a per credit basis, so one might expect low-income students to be more likely to reverse transfer. However, middle-income students reverse transfer more than high-income or low-income students (Hillman, Lum, & Hossler, 2008;

Yang, 2006). This counter intuitive result is not completely understood. It could be that low-income students are more likely to receive loans and grants, thus making four-year colleges more affordable. Middle-income students could also feel pressure to attend a four-year school without the academic ability to complete a bachelor's degree. This pressure to attend a four-year college may also prevent students from considering two-year schools.

Justification for Accepting Undergraduate Reverse Transfer Students

It must be conceded that students who attend multiple institutions of any type are in school for longer and spend more for their education (Peter & Cataldi, 2005; Jacobson & Mokher, 2009; Light & Strayer, 2004). Transferring students find that some credits do not meet the requirements of the new school and program. Insofar as students were unsuccessful at their first institution, transferring students must also repeat some classes. This will naturally increase the time to a degree and require students to buy more credits than students who stay at a single college. However, transferring in general is otherwise beneficial to the student, and reverse transfer students are beneficial to the colleges that accept them.

Transferring does not adversely affect students' chances of graduation (Light & Strayer, 2004). Given that many students transfer because of poor performance or to find a school that is a better match, the equivalent graduation rates might indicate that students improve their individual chances of success by transferring. Students who transfer see higher wages than those who stay at a single school (Light & Strayer, 2004). This could simply be a function of time.

Students who transfer spend more time in school, earn more credits, and therefore have more skills. Changing schools is also a clarifying experience. Students who transfer do more cost-benefit analysis in choosing a school. The result is a school and degree which is a better fit or more likely to provide gainful employment.

Light and Strayer's (2004) research does not specifically analyze reverse transfer students. Students attending a two-year college stand to earn less than students attending a four-year college. However, the wages of students from a vocational school are only about 15 percent less than a student from a four-year school (Jacobson & Mokher, 2009). Considering students at vocational schools attend school for half the time and half of the credits, reverse transferring may still provide an economic benefit. If transferring improves students' ability to earn a degree, reverse transferring could represent a huge improvement in earnings.

Because large numbers of reverse transfer students are middle class, accepting these students is controversial. The concern is that reverse transfer students take opportunities away from the low-income and academically underprepared students who are traditionally accepted into community and technical colleges (McHugh, 2003; Townsend, 2000). Serving underrepresented populations has been a hallmark of two-year colleges. Students with credits from a four-year college can look more appealing to schools even if all else is equal. The mission of the school must be carefully considered when deciding to accept reverse transfer students.

To the institution, accepting reverse transfer students is a way to increase the student population and therefore the revenue for the college. Remaining economically viable is important to the mission of any college. Obviously a community or technical college cannot serve the needs of the community if it shuts down. However, this still can be seen as a problem if it is done at the expense of first time students.

Community and technical colleges can be viewed as providing reverse transfer students a second chance at success (Townsend, 2000). This seems consistent with the two-year schools' mission to provide opportunities for underprepared students. In this sense, accepting reverse transfer students is analogous to the traditional role of bolstering the skills of underprepared students coming out of high school. If students plan to transfer back to a four-year school, accepting reverse transfer students is consistent with the role of two-year colleges to prepare students for transferring to a four-year school. Either way, accepting undergraduate reverse transfer students is consistent with the mission of two-year education as long as it increases enrollment and does not replace non-reverse transfer students.

The ethics of accepting post-baccalaureate students remains an open question. One of the most promising reasons for accepting reverse transfer students is their benefit to other students (Townsend, 2000, Yang, 2006). Despite their performance at their first institution, reverse transfer students tend to be more academically prepared. Because of their preparedness, reverse transfer students provide support to their classmates in learning communities and very

often take on formal support roles in the college such as tutoring. Although the actual benefit to the institution through reducing services and through increasing the success rates of students is not clear, this is a positive result of accepting undergraduate and post- baccalaureate reverse transfer students.

Methodology

To answer the research questions about the reverse transfer students at MTC, I implemented a qualitative action research study (Mills, 2011). I systematically collected data from successful reverse transfer students. Peer tutors at MTC were considered to be successful students because they were well vetted. To become a tutor a student must be recommended by an instructor within their program, must have a grade point average of 3.0 or higher, must be interviewed by the Tutor Coordinator, and must conduct a mock tutoring session with the Tutor Coordinator. Tutors are selected based on their expertise within their program and ability to work with others. Current and former tutors who previously spent any amount of time at a four-year college prior to attending MTC were asked to participate.

Data was collected through a combination of formal and informal interview techniques (Mills, 2011). Scripted questions were not used. However, each participant was asked questions covering their experiences in high school, first college choice, experience at their first college, reasons for leaving their first college, other college experiences, technical college choice, experiences at MTC, experiences tutoring, and participation in college related activities. The exact line of questioning was intentionally left partially open to allow for authentic dialogue and to allow the research to be guided by the data that the participant provided and not my own bias (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interviews were recorded and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Each interview was then transcribed and analyzed. Finally, the participants gathered in

a focus group to evaluate the themes that emerged from my analysis and provided feedback about the data and its implications (Mills, 2011).

Setting

All participants of this study attended a private, non-profit technical college in an urban area of the Midwest that I have given the pseudonym Midwestern Technical College (MTC). The school largely offers two-year Associate of Applied Science degrees preparing students for trade-based careers. Bachelor of Science degrees and various certificates are also available to students. The enrollment of the technical college is approximately 1000 to 1500 degree-seeking students. The student population is about 85% male. Students of color make up about 25% of the student body. Slightly over half the students are of a traditional college age, 24 and under (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). I work in the college's learning center where I teach developmental mathematics and coordinate the tutoring program.

The participants are all current or former employees of the college who worked in the learning center as tutors. The learning center provides peer-based tutoring for the entire campus. The center also provides developmental education courses, advising, individual and group study space, and facilitates the academic probation process. Each day 75 to 100 students use the learning center, and on average 50% or more of the student body uses the center in a given year. Most students come to the center voluntarily or because they have self identified as needing extra help. Other students are recommended by instructors or advisors.

For the developmental classes, students are required to take classes based on their transcripts and placement test results. Students on academic probation are also required to study in the learning center several times per week as part of a comprehensive academic plan.

Participants

Seven current and former tutors had reverse transferred to MTC and agreed to take part in the study. Six of the seven participants were students at the technical college and tutors at the time of the study. The seventh participant was a tutor when he was a student at the college several years prior to the study. He was a full time faculty member at the time of the study. As the tutor coordinator, the six current students were under my supervision at the time of the study. The seventh participant was formally under my direct supervision and a colleague at the time of the study. Each participant took classes for at least one quarter at a four-year college prior to transferring to the technical school. Each student's transfer history was different, and it played an important role in their choice to attend a technical college. To honor the students' right to privacy I have used pseudonyms.

Blake

Blake was in his mid 30s at the time of the interview. After completing high school in the Midwest, he planned on attending a military academy in New York to play hockey. After attending the cadet basic training during the summer before his freshman year, he decided that the military was not for him. Instead,

Blake enrolled at a private catholic college in his home state. Due to financial reasons, he withdrew after a few months.

Blake took a year off to play in a junior hockey league. Playing hockey also drove Blake to a university in the Southwest, where he played for a very popular club team and attended classes. His first semester went well. Then he sustained a career ending injury. Blake subsequently lost interest in class and withdrew in his second quarter. While attending school there, Blake also completed a bartending program. Without any hockey scholarships, school was now his financial responsibility. Because the cost was less, Blake moved back to his home state to work and attend a community college. His original plan was to earn an associate's degree in law enforcement and possibly transfer to a four-year university. The money Blake started making in food service and bartending was lucrative. The cash from tips alone was very alluring, and it made the task of college work seem futile. After only a year Blake withdrew from the community college as well.

A few years in the restaurant business disillusioned Blake. The work was no longer fulfilling, despite the money. When the restaurant he was working at faced consolidation but offered to keep him on the staff, Blake saw this as an opportunity. He instead quit and went back to the Southwest and completed a six-month certificate in guitar building. After unsuccessfully looking for guitar repair work in several states, Blake opened his own shop fixing guitars back home. Because his new guitar shop was not paying the bills, Blake also did construction work. After several more years Blake became dissatisfied with both

the construction and guitar repair businesses. On top of that the economy started slumping. Once again Blake saw an opportunity. As part of his guitar repair business Blake had the opportunity to work with a computer drafting software called Solidworks. Designing guitars gave Blake a clear vision for what he wanted to do next. He chose to go back to school. This time he enrolled at the two-year vocational school MTC to learn more about engineering and drafting. This is where I met Blake. He was in his final quarter and about to graduate at the time of his interview.

Anthony

Anthony was also in his mid 30s. His academic story started back in elementary school. This self-described over achiever was in every club by the 6th grade. His first C came in junior high, and he saw it as a badge of honor because he was no longer a “goodie-goodie.” In high school Anthony was still a good student, especially in math and science. However, he admits to not performing at his best, and his grades reflected the lack of effort.

After graduating from high school, Anthony felt compelled to go to college. He chose mechanical engineering because everyone in his family was an engineer. An out of state college still in the Midwest was Anthony’s choice partly because of its reputable engineering program but mostly because of the school’s location. It was far enough from home that he could feel independent; however, it was not too far from home that he could not visit home regularly.

Something changed in Anthony’s approach to school. He focused more on the social aspects of college and was no longer studious. To avoid failing

Anthony dropped most of his classes in his first quarter. This landed him on academic probation. His performance did not greatly improve. At the beginning of his second year Anthony knew something had to change, and he would have to start applying himself. Unfortunately, nothing did change. Because of poor academic performance and getting caught at party on campus late in the school year, Anthony realized he was about to get expelled. He did not stick around to find out and did not return for a third year. He hid the real reason for not returning from his parents. Not completing school was very embarrassing for Anthony. To this day he has not told his parents all the sordid details.

Instead of school Anthony focused on working. He started working in construction with a friend. After a few years in construction, Anthony got a job in cabinetry. Eight years later he suffered another let down when he was laid off. This was tough on Anthony despite the fact that he did not enjoy his job. Being unemployed got Anthony thinking about college again, but he and his wife were about to buy a house and had a baby on the way. He worried that school would put too much of a burden on his family. However, Anthony and his wife mutually came to the conclusion that a two-year technical college would be best. He enrolled at MTC to pursue a construction related degree very soon after being laid off. At the time of this interview Anthony was nearing graduation and working as a tutor.

John

Now in his mid 20s, John was considered by many to be very talented academically. He grew up on the east coast. In high school he would achieve

good grades on tests without a great deal of studying. On the SAT he scored in the 90th percentile among the students at his school. While John finished with a respectable 3.0 GPA, he admitted to having bad study habits. John described himself as the kind of student who only does what is assigned and never does above average work. The relatively high GPA was due to his test taking ability, thus the disproportionally high SAT score. These bad habits would become a problem as John moved on to college.

John felt a high GPA would have made more colleges available to him. However, the lack of extracurricular activities barred John from attending his first choice in four-year colleges. His second choice, where he was accepted, was high on his list because it was only 15 minutes away from his house. To save money, John decided to commute from home. During his first semester John continued to get by because his classes primarily used tests for assessment. By the second semester John's motivation had waned. As a music major, John attributes this loss of motivation to the requirement to play many types of instruments, despite only wanting to play the guitar.

John ended up on academic probation. Because they didn't want to pay for poor performance, John's parents pulled him out of school for a semester. John was tested and diagnosed with moderate to severe ADD. This was initially controlled by medication and later by coping mechanisms. The next semester John went back for one class, history. He ended up getting an A. This positive experience led him to switch his major to history. The following semester he went back full time and again performed poorly. The second semester of his third

year of school John went part time and earned two *As*. Entering his fourth year of school John finally earned enough credits to be a sophomore.

By this time John's parents had moved to the Midwest. His full load of classes included several history classes, which he did not enjoy because of all the writing. Finally, John realized this wasn't going to work, and he dropped out in December. John's parents gave him an ultimatum: either find a job in six months or come to Midwest and attend a trade school. After an unsuccessful six-month search, John moved to the Midwest and enrolled at MCT the following fall. John was wrapping up his first year and working as a tutor when I interviewed him.

Donald

Donald is also in his mid twenties. He was a standout student at an urban high school, earning a prestigious scholarship from a private donor. The donor did not like Donald's first choice of college, a private Midwestern school, so he selected a private college on the west coast instead. Right away Donald realized the distance from home was going to be a problem. When he moved into the dorm, he had forgotten his pillows back home. While missing pillows was not an undue hardship, this incident came symbolize for Donald all the problems of attending school out of state. Also, the school's religious affiliation was of a different denomination than Donald's denomination. Initially, he did not anticipate this to be a problem, but he found it difficult to attend the school's required religiously themed discussions. Finally, Donald had a hard time picking a major. These factors added up to poor grades.

After a year Donald transferred to his first college choice back in his home state. Despite the displeasure of the donor, he continued to earn his scholarship. This college experience was much better for Donald. In three years Donald graduated with a bachelor's degree in marketing. Before graduating, Donald took a campus job doing some market research. His job was to look at competing schools' websites to see the services and programs that are offered and how the websites were designed. From this experience Donald became interested in web design. During his last semester he took a class on computers for business, which gave him a taste of the web-programming field. He wanted more. The fall after graduation, Donald enrolled at MTC to peruse web programming and design. Nearing graduation, Donald was working as a tutor at MTC when I interviewed him.

Eva

Like Donald, Eva graduated from a four-year college. While attending a rural Midwestern high school, Eva enrolled in Post Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) classes at a local community college. For the last year and a half of high school she earned college credits. After graduation she enrolled at an urban public university in her home state. Because of the PSEO credits she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies in two and a half years. Without a career in mind she decided to stay in school and get a second degree in Mortuary Science. In an additional year and a half she had her second degree. As part of her degree she interned at a funeral home. After graduation Eva worked at the same funeral home where she interned for several years. Eva decided she wanted a career change because she was getting burned out and she did not see any opportunity

for advancement. Eva enrolled in a construction related program at MTC. She was a few quarters away from graduation and working as a tutor at the time of the interview.

Joseph

Joseph was a *B* student in high school. With a desire to become an aerospace engineer, he enrolled in a large, urban university in the Midwest. He chose this institution because several family members had graduated from there. Joseph enjoyed the social aspects of college; however, the freedom provided by a four-year university was difficult for him to manage. The classes were not challenging and he did not attend. After a year he dropped out.

The next year Joseph spent working two jobs: “slinging steel” and working in a warehouse. It was Joseph’s dad who encouraged him to try the same two-year technical college he enrolled in but did not complete as a young man, MTC. Joseph attended MTC and studied to be an electrician, and he worked as a tutor. After graduation, he reenrolled in the same engineering program that he dropped out of three years earlier, but once again it did not work out. Instead, he transferred into the education department at the same university and graduated with a technical education degree. At the time of the interview Joseph was an instructor at MTC.

Tommy

Tommy was a good high school student who took several Advanced Placement (AP) classes. After graduating, he did not know what he wanted to do, so he decided to follow in the footsteps of his mother who graduated from a

university the same year. She started at a two-year community college, so Tommy did the same. He did not feel challenged at the community college, and he transferred to a four-year university in the Midwest after only one semester. Nothing struck his interest at the university. His motivation began to decrease, and so did his grades. He failed to see the utility of the course work and dropped out after attending one year. After working for a year he enrolled at MTC to become an electrician. At the time of the interview Tommy was in his final quarter at MTC and working as a tutor.

Analysis of Data

This study followed a phenomenological approach (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). To gain a greater understanding of reverse transfer students I listened to the participants' experiences and asked probing questions of those who had reverse transferred. After recording and transcribing the interviews, the data was analyzed. Each interview was individually coded into a list of approximately ten categories, supported by the direct quotes of the participants. These categories were then compared among all the participants. Similar categories were compiled to form themes. The five strongest themes became the basis of my theory (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Mills, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I then presented my findings to the participants of the study in a focus group and allowed them to discuss the implications. From the data, my own analysis, and the analysis of the participants I built my recommendations.

Allowing the data to drive my theory helped expose my own biases and ensured the findings of this study to be based on the actual experiences of reverse

transfer students (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Very little research exists on reverse transfer students, especially those who enroll at a technical college. Even within MTC very little discussion revolves around reverse transfer students and their significance. A phenomenological approach was necessary to breach this unexplored phenomenon.

Findings

At the onset of this study I hoped to gain a better understanding of (a) why students reverse transfer, (b) why so many successful students at MTC were reverse transfer students, (c) what lessons all students could learn from the experiences of reverse transfer students, and (d) what lessons colleges could learn. From the interview data five themes emerged.

- High School Performance – Each participant described himself or herself as a good student in high school.
- Common Beliefs about the Role of Higher Education – College was seen as a place for career relevant training in an area that interested the participants.
- Trivial Reasons for Selecting a College and a Degree – Despite having a clear vision of what colleges should be, the participants selected their first college and degree without careful consideration.
- Time, Reflection, and Experience – Participants saw value in the passage of time, the ability to reflect, and the opportunity to gain experiences that transferring provided.
- Connections with the School – Participants credited the connections formed with the school, the staff, and the students as a part of their success.

High School Performance

One might assume that a college dropout has always struggled in school. This was not true for the participants of this study. Each participant in the study

viewed him or herself as a good student and demonstrated that ability in the classroom. However, most of the participants admitted to not performing at their best in high school.

Donald's refrain, "In high school I was a pretty good student," was echoed by each of the participants. John even described himself as "gifted." In a very limited sense this is proven by the fact that each participant graduated from high school. However, their successes extended further than simply graduating. Tommy and Joseph took advanced placement courses in high school and earned college credit. Eva took advantage of Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) at a community and technical college near her home-town. After graduating from high school, Blake took honors courses at a preparatory school to get his grades up before gaining acceptance to a military academy. Donald won a prestigious scholarship from his high school based on his performance. John scored in the 90th percentile on the SAT test. These are not trivial achievements. By any reasonable definition the participants of this study were academically strong high school students.

For some, this success extended into their post-secondary education. Most notably, Eva, with PSEO classes, was able to earn a bachelor's degree in Urban Studies within two and a half years after her high school graduation. A year and a half later she had a second degree from the same university in mortuary science. Even though Donald was unsuccessful at the first four-year college he attended in southern California, he was still able to graduate from his second college within four years out of high school. Tommy attended a community college after

graduating from high school. He was successful but felt the school was not challenging. Tommy said, “I didn’t really feel a difference at all moving from high school to [the community college]... I didn’t want a second rate education.”

While the other participants of this study were not successful in their first attempts at college, they did not struggle because of an inability to learn. They successfully completed high school and graduated with an associate’s degree from MTC. While some might question the rigor of high school and technical education, their success demonstrates the participants’ ability to learn and the commitment necessary to complete course work. As further evidence of their ability to learn, many of the participants experienced academic successes beyond high school and MTC. In the process of dropping out of several four year colleges, Blake completed a bar tending program and earned a certificate in guitar repair. Joseph graduated with a bachelor’s degree after completing his course work at MTC.

Given the history of six participants who struggled or dropped out at some point in their college careers, failure was the anomaly. This anomaly experience caused a variety of reactions from the participants. This reaction played a pivotal role in their choice of a technical college and their success at MTC. Concerning dropping out of college, Anthony said, “I was really embarrassed about it. I was supposed to be a smart kid, but here I am back at home.” This reaction was unique. He put all the responsibility on himself. Such a harsh assessment of himself was part of the reason that Anthony was unable to return to school for fifteen years.

The remaining participants who dropped out were able to deflect at least some of the blame. John concluded, “Learning isn’t hard for me, it’s doing homework.” However, a diagnosis of ADD was initially a scapegoat for John: “This isn’t my fault. I have this problem, and I wasn’t treated properly for it. Then I realized that the medicine did what it was supposed to... I realized it was me.” Like Anthony, John ultimately put a large part of the blame on himself.

Joseph’s family did not take the news of his withdrawal from school very well. His family’s disappointment had a greater affect on Joseph than simply damage to his pride. Joseph said, “My family, I wouldn’t say disowned me, but they took it really hard that I failed out.” This feeling stuck with him because he went back to the same program after graduating from MTC: “I’m kind of stubborn... I wanted to give it one more shot.” Joseph attributed much of the difficulty during his freshman year to the deaths of two friends and his grandfather. He described his grandfather’s death as a sign, because it happened during finals week. In the end, Joseph did take ownership for his outcome, “I think there was some confidence or overconfidence in my abilities to weather the storm as I went through because high school was so easy.”

Both Blake and Donald cited the religious overtones of the private colleges they selected as part of the reason they did not fit in. Donald struggled with the school’s denomination being different from his own. More importantly, he did not like a grade being assigned to attending religious services regularly. In contrast, Blake took issue with organized religion as a whole, especially

Catholicism. Of course, the first college Blake attended was affiliated with the Catholic Church.

Taking into account the academic histories of these students, it is clear that dropping out of school was atypical. Reacting by placing blame on themselves or external factors is to be expected; however, this was more than pitying and complaining. The participants' assessments seemed to be honest. Remarkably, instead of being driven away from school, these students learned from their experiences and critically assessed the best school and program for their needs.

Common Beliefs about the Role of Higher Education

When am I ever going to use this stuff? This is the most dreaded question for any teacher; however, not because the teacher lacks an answer. Every teacher has a multitude of answers for this question. This question is so dreaded because there is not likely a rational answer for the student asking the question. As a math teacher, I have to admit that many people live their life without needing more than some basic arithmetic, myself included. It is not a surprise that the students in this study asked themselves this question. All students have asked themselves this question. The participants of this study share several beliefs about the role of higher education that is very revealing about them as reverse transfer students.

While every student questions what they are learning, these students did more than just question one class. They questioned the purpose of pursuing an entire degree and even the nature of the college they were attending. These questions reveal their beliefs about the role of higher education. Even Eva, who dutifully completed her degree in Urban Studies, started to question the value of her degree when it did not lead to a job within the field. She went back for a

second degree in mortuary science because she wanted “something that was more directly related to employment. Also [the school’s] Mortuary Science program is very good about connecting students with funeral directors.” Each participant questioned his or her education. John’s first degree choice was music because he wanted to play guitar, but he said, “They were going to make me learn all these other instruments... That’s not what I’m here for.” While enrolled in a liberal arts program at a four-year university, Tommy wondered, “Why am I learning about ethics and philosophy, talking about Aristotle? I don’t see why I need to know this stuff.”

Not only did they question their education, they all came to the same conclusion. As Blake bluntly put it, “There was no other reason to come to [MTC] then, I needed a job.” The predominant notion among these students was that higher education is designed to prepare you for a job. A liberal arts education based in reflection and theory was not meeting their expectations. After attempting an engineering program for a second time, Joseph finally realized this fact; he said, “The theoretical side of it, I didn’t really like. I was more of a practical thinker, a practical learner.” In addition to preparing you for the workforce, college “is supposed to shape you into who you are supposed to be,” as Tommy said. Eva, who grew up in a rural area of the Midwest and came to a large, urban university four hours from home, shared Tommy’s sentiment, “They have a ton of different majors. It’s a huge school. I should be able to figure out what I want to do through classes when I’m up there.” These are lofty student

expectations for any school. It is not surprising that their expectations were not met.

Another strongly held belief among all the participants is the role one's interest plays in the ability to learn and persist in school. Unfortunately, some had to learn this lesson the hard way. Eva, chose mortuary science because of the career focused program, and because it interested her. On the other hand John spent a lot of time pursuing a number of different majors such as music and history hoping to find something that interested him. Blake, who learned this lesson after attending several schools and certificate programs, summed it up nicely, "If you don't have any interests, if you don't know where you're going, if you have no directions, take a year off, take two years off, take 15 years off, take 20 years off."

When describing why they were successful at the technical college, the participants credited their interest in the subject matter and the career focused curriculum. Tommy's sentiment was typical, "Eighty percent of my day is directly related to the field I'm going into." It was the career related training at MTC that kept Tommy and the other participants interested, even when they were doing course work that did not apply to their careers.

Trivial Reasons for Selecting a College and a Degree

In describing why she picked her first college, Eva said, "Rather than thinking about what I wanted in a school or what kind of majors they offered, I said, 'Where do I want to live? I'll go there.'" In hindsight Eva's strategy did not seem like a good reason for choosing a college. Selecting a school for trivial reasons was common. The participants chose a school with a specific purpose.

The problem was the reasoning had little to do with what they wanted from a school and what would help them be successful.

For Eva, the student who selected her university because it would be a nice place to live, this arbitrary choice worked out for her. She earned two degrees from the institution. However, earning a degree is apparently not the only litmus test for determining if a school or program was a success. After working at a funeral home for a few years, Eva recognized a few aspects of the profession she did not enjoy. About the mortuary science profession Eva said, “It was interesting and I liked the people I worked with, but I also noticed that they had been doing almost the exact same thing for almost thirty years. I don’t think I can do this forever.” She also said, “There’s not a lot of room for error. It’s pretty stressful in some ways.” Before completing her mortuary science degree she was interested in architecture and construction, and she ended up going back to a technical school for a degree in architecture and construction.

Eva’s success does not appear to be the norm. The other participants selected their first college for trivial reasons but did not graduate. Like Eva, Anthony and John chose their first colleges because of its location. Because he did not gain acceptance at his first college of choice, John said he selected his second choice because “it was fifteen minutes away from my house.” Anthony said his choice was “far enough away from home, but it was still in the Midwest.” Distance from home as opposed to the features of the college drove their choice.

Anthony chose his program based on the career decisions of several family members. He said, “My family, it’s all engineers. My two younger sisters

are engineers now. My dad was. So, I was going to go into mechanical engineering.” Joseph also relied on his family history. He said, “I had chosen a long time ago that I wanted to go to [the university]. That was something that was a legacy in my family. My aunt, my grandfather, and my grandmother all went to [the university], so it was the idea that I could continue on that journey.” Tommy followed in his mother’s footsteps by first attending a community college before transferring to a four-year university. Tommy’s choice of a four-year university was motivated by friends and the opportunity to live independently.

Location, friends, and family history were not bad reasons to help select a school or program. However, solely relying on such reasons did not take into account the participants interests or desire for career focused education. They did not consider these conditions while selecting their first colleges. In fact, it was not until after attending their first college that the participants even developed these opinions about higher education. Besides, their schooling would eventually lead them down a nontraditional path. Very few of the participants had examples of friends or family who attended a technical college.

Blake and Donald also chose colleges for reasons other than their academic needs. Their experience highlights the number of influences on college choice. Like a number of the participants, location played a role in Donald’s choice to go to a college, but he was directed away from his first choice, a private college in the Midwest. The donor of the scholarship he applied for in high school did not like Donald’s first choice of schools, so he selected a different college to attend. He won the scholarship, but the school was not a good fit. The

first few colleges Blake attended were very deliberately selected but not based on academics. Blake selected three colleges based on his desire to play hockey. While he found some success playing hockey and certainly enjoyed himself at these colleges, he did not experience the same level of success in academics.

Even within this very small sample, a wide variety of external factors influenced the students' choice of colleges. Location, friends, family, athletics, and scholarships were common and valuable reasons for selecting a college. Ultimately, this group demonstrated compatibility with the school played the pivotal role in their success in higher education. For this group, internal factors of a school were not fully considered until after attending their first college.

Time, Reflection, and Experience

The participants attributed a great deal of their success to the schools' ability to connect with their interests and to provide vocational training. However, they recognized that their college was not the only determiner of their success. Attending college and transferring seemed to buy time for the participants to mature. Specifically, transferring forced the students to reflect upon what was best for them and their future.

Time alone seemed to play a major role. Blake, for example, attended a private catholic university in the Midwest despite having misgivings about religion. When pressed about this he said, "I was young and dumb." He was not the only one to reflect negatively about his younger self. Anthony called himself a "stupid kid" when describing his first college experience. Joseph quoted his dad's description of his attitude as a young adult, "stinkin' thinkin'." It was common for the participants to be critical of themselves as young adults, which

highlights a downside of attending college at a young age. Others took a more positive spin and credited their age and maturity for their performance after transferring to MTC. Donald credited his maturity for earning his best grades at MTC. Tommy had previously stigmatized technical education and felt that a four-year college was necessary. However, his attitude changed, “Now, being a little bit older, I don’t think [going to a four-year college] is necessary.” Age seemed to play as much of a role as the students finding a school and program that was a good fit.

Dropping out of school and the passage of time also forced the participants to reflect. This reflection was largely spurred by the experiences gained from attending school and working. Through their experiences the students of this study were then able to articulate what they did and did not want in both education and a career. Given the shared belief that schools should prepare students for a job, it was not surprising that many came to the same conclusion as Tommy, “When I was taking that year off, I did decide I really like working with my hands.” In addition to wanting a career focused education these students wanted education that could be applied directly to a job. Technical education was the natural conclusion.

However, reflection upon the school that was the most suited for them was not enough. Each participant had an experience that motivated him or her to go back to school. For Eva it was becoming burned out as a mortician, “It’s a lot of emotional stress with the families and the death.” For Anthony, it was getting laid off from his cabinetry job: “It was out of my control. I was done... I was

depressed.” For Blake, the nature of his work was what drove him back to school. About one of his jobs Blake said, “Bartending sucks. It is the worst job ever, but the money is good.” In the end it was the decline of Blake’s construction and guitar business that motivated him to re-enroll in school. Joseph’s time working with his father “slinging steel” told him that he needed a job that was mentally stimulating. These negative experiences motivated the students to go back to school, but did little to inform them about what to study.

The participants drew upon their positive experiences for inspiration. Donald’s breakthrough came when he took a campus job doing market research, looking at other schools’ websites. He realized that he should add web-programming skills to his marketing degree. As part of Blake’s guitar repair business he had the opportunity to use a three-dimensional computer-aided design program, which led him to pursue an engineer drafting degree at MTC. Anthony considered his experience in construction when he picked a degree in construction management. Eva did not use her work experience but her school experience to choose a career path. Based on her first degree in urban studies she took a construction and design program.

Whether positive or negative, the students’ life experiences prompted reflection and guided them to go back to school and into a program for which they were well suited. Such reflection did not happen when the participants were young adults as was evident with their first college choice experience and with their performance at that college. Time and reflection ultimately had a positive impact.

Connections with the School

“I loved the guys I was working with because so many of them were like me. They had had previous educational experiences that were not very good.” Joseph’s experience is not unique. One of the most consistent determining factors to college persistence is connection to the institution and relationships with others at the school (Tinto, 1987; Tinto 1997). Despite the nontraditional path of these reverse transfer students, the classic retention model of connectedness still applies. However, some the students in this study formed relationships and had connections at each college they attended. The technical college environment provided a unique opportunity to form bonds with other students within the classroom.

Joseph picked his first college based on family career tradition and his friends. During his freshman year he made many friends in the dorms. However, he was missing structure, “The freedom of going to classes that was a difficult thing for me. I was used to having a regimented schedule.” The traditional model for a four-year school did not work for Joseph. He needed an instructor who knew him and held him accountable. Without the structure, Joseph stopped attending classes regularly. Contrasting his four year experience with the technical college experience Joseph said,

Going to a bigger university I was closed in. I was a number. I didn’t have anyone that was in the professor role or in the instructor role that I was really able to bond with, whereas here I was able to open up.

He received the regiment he was looking for at MTC where the class sizes were small and attendance was taken daily.

Tommy and Anthony had similar experiences. Tommy chose his Midwestern university because he was able to move in with friends, and college quickly turned into a “social thing” for Anthony. In Tommy’s words, both Tommy and Anthony got caught up in “the normal college distractions.” Anthony also suffered from a lack of accountability. He stopped attending lectures, opting to only attend test days. Obviously it was difficult to connect to the institution and classmates when you do not attend. Tommy, as previously mentioned, could not connect with the theoretical nature of his classes. Both Tommy and Anthony participated in extracurricular activities in grade school and high school. However, aside from Tommy playing ultimate Frisbee, neither formed meaningful connections at their four-year schools. In contrast, at the technical college they were both involved with several campus organizations such as the honor society, student professional organizations, and tutoring.

Despite her success and her two degrees, Eva followed a similar pattern. She was not active in high school or at the university where she earned her two degrees. This changed when she attended the technical college. In addition to tutoring, she organized and attended events for students in her career path. She felt like the extra effort was worth it: “It’s a little bit more stress, but I think it is also beneficial.”

Donald learned the power of school involvement and relationships long before starting at MTC. At his first university in southern California he felt disassociated. The one bright spot was the relationship he formed with his roommate. Unfortunately, it was not enough to overcome the poor match of his

school. At the second university that Donald attended he was more vested because it was actually his first choice before being steered away by the donor of his scholarship. In addition, he followed what worked at his first college and lived in campus housing with other transfer students. He also took an on-campus job related to his degree. Donald also took advantage of on campus resources including tutoring.

The involvement continued to increase for Donald as he attended MTC. Once again he had a personal connection to the school. He described the progression:

I was obligated to be at college... I just picked [my first university] because that is where I felt comfortable. Coming to [MTC] though, it wasn't so much an obligation as it was a want. That changes the mindset. He was also able to form a close relationship with his lead instructor, someone he talked about as a mentor. Donald also described MTC in general as providing students with "focused attention."

Like Donald, Blake experienced the value of connecting to a college long before he attended MTC. While at a university in the Southwest, Blake was doing well in school until he injured his knee and could no longer play hockey. Hockey was enough to keep him motivated in the classroom. Once that motivation was removed his performance declined. More than any other participant Blake needed the content of the classes he took to directly connect to a job. Thus, he was able to complete certificates in guitar building and bar tending as well as a degree from a technical college. Blake had a love of learning, but he was largely opposed to

institutions. If employers did not require school he would have never attended. He was a fiercely independent learner. However, in addition to reviewing the content, Blake said he started tutoring because, “I like working with people, so that helps. I think I can learn as much working with people as I can in any one of these classrooms, because you actually learn a lot working with people.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overview of the Study

I started this research because of a causal observation that a high proportion the tutors at MTC previously attended a four year college. I began to wonder what lessons could be learned from the experiences of these reverse transfer students. As a teacher of remedial classes I was interested in what seemed like a rags to riches story. Going from college drop out to top of the class is the kind of transformation I want to see in all my students. I hoped to reveal the secrets of their success. Also, these students have unique perspectives about college policy because they have attended multiple institutions. I wanted to learn what schools can do to better support all students especially those who decide to transfer. Finally, in a country where most high school students attend college, I wanted to know what allowed these students to break from tradition and attend a two-year technical college.

Because little data exists on students who reverse transfer and next to nothing about those who reverse transfer to a vocational college, I simply wanted to hear the students' perspectives. In this qualitative study I interviewed seven current and former students who were employed as peer tutors at a private, non-profit technical college in the Midwest. All of these students previously attended four-year colleges, two of which had graduated with bachelor's degrees. I then analyzed the interviews to find common themes.

I was surprised to learn that the participants of this study were successful high school students. I had assumed that the success at MTC represented a

sudden change in the students' performance. Instead, dropping out of college was more of an anomaly in their academic performance, and one student didn't even have that blemish on her academic record. I could not directly compare these students to the students taking my remedial classes. The participants wanted practical education that would lead to employment. They chose their first college based on superficial criteria instead of what was in their best interests. Each one benefited from the experience of going to school or working. This finally spurred them to reflect on what they truly wanted in a college. Finally, they were able to form connections to the technical college and its people.

Conclusions

The degree to which a student connects with a school and its people is the most thoroughly studied and effective element of college retention (Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1997). It is not surprising then that forming connections was a reason why these students persisted at a technical college. The results of this study reconfirm this finding and further generalize it to include reverse transfer students at 2-year technical colleges.

It was surprising to learn that the undergraduate reverse transfer students in this study formed meaningful connections at the four-year colleges they attended as well. The connections were largely social and had little to do with academics however. The school itself very often did not suit them for a variety of reasons. A two-year technical college provided these students with a greater opportunity to form both social and academic connections within the classroom.

The blame does not solely fall on the first universities that the participants attended. The students admitted to enrolling classes that they had little interest in. This did not become clear until after taking the classes. The students seemed to be unclear as to what they wanted from a college and did not know what to expect either. Through this experience and reflection over time the students of this study realized the level of involvement that was required of them and they knew what they wanted from a college. The combination of a better fit of school and a strong interest in the content allowed the students to form connections more easily. The students increased maturity level also played a significant role.

The natural response to students being underprepared for college is to call for better advising and preparation of students prior to selecting a school. Traditional recommendations deny the role that experience and time played in the ability of these students to make better choices. Many of the participants knew about two-year colleges, some even knew friends and family who attended a two-year college. These influences were unable to dissuade them from attending a four-year college. I doubt any amount of counseling would have changed their minds. These students did not know what they wanted from a school and what was expected of them as students until they attended one. The onset of adulthood makes these lessons more poignant. Because attending a four-year college felt obligatory, the students did not make adequate decisions about the best school for them. This did not change until the students got older. Little progress could have been made with the participants as teenagers.

The trend for every student to earn a four-year degree has been successful in motivating large number of students to attend college. This study suggests four-year colleges are not the right fit for all students. At the very least college attendance should be more evenly distributed between two-year and four-year institutions. The prevailing stereotype has been that high performing students attend four-year colleges, while low performing students attend two-year colleges. The calculus for who attends what college is far more complex. The undergraduate reverse transfer students were successful in high school, but struggled at the four-year college, and the two post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students were successful at the high school, four-year, and two-year levels. Successful high school students can find value in two-year technical education.

This almost implies that a two-year technical college could be valuable for just about anyone. However, this notion is controversial. Two-year technical colleges have served a niche in higher education as a place for students who have traditionally struggled with academics. Reverse transfer students represent a stronger group of students who could crowd out the traditional students, many of whom have thrived within a technical education environment. Two-year technical colleges should continue to serve this population; however, it is clear that a larger subset of college students could benefit from a two-year technical college. The fact that many reverse transfer students evolve into the role of tutor might be their ethical saving grace. Instead of crowding out the academically weak students, reverse transfer students are providing them with support.

This still leaves the question of who is best suited for a two-year technical college as opposed to a four-year college. While this is a complicated question without a straight forward answer, the findings of this study challenges some widely held beliefs about the students who should attend four-year versus two-year colleges. At the onset of this study I was guilty of one of these assumptions. I was hoping the reverse transfer student could tell me something about how students are able overcome poor academic performances in the past and become a successful student. I was feeding off the misconception that four-year colleges are for successful high school students and two-year colleges are for marginal and poor students.

The participants of this study felt the same way. Because they viewed themselves as successful high school students, they felt obligated to attend a four-year college. Success in high school is an indicator for success in college (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, and Elliot, 2002). However, this is not exclusive to four-year colleges. Successful high school students also make successful two-year technical college students. While this result destroys a misconception, it does not give any clues as to who is best suited for vocational education. Instead, the result simply implies that a wider range of students consider two-year technical colleges.

All of the participants viewed college as the means to an end, a job. This is not to say that four-year colleges do not lead to employment, they do. However, the participants failed to see the connection between the classroom content and a job. For a student who is highly focused on employment and has a

low tolerance for learning for the sake of learning, a four-year education is not a good place for such a student. The post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students of this study, for example, made it through their four-year degree because they were in programs with highly applicable skills: marketing and mortuary science. The undergraduate reverse transfer students were not able to get beyond the general classes. Two-year technical colleges' primary purpose is to provide career specific training.

In addition to putting theory in front of practice, four-year colleges place a high degree of emphasis on freedom and exploration. Several participants expressed a preference for a more structured environment. While four-year colleges provide academic and career counseling, students are still provided a wide range of choice and the ability to make course choices based on their preferences. This is not always helpful for students, especially students who are hoping college will guide them into employment. Technical colleges base their programs on the needs of industry, and therefore tell students what to take based on the needs of the specific career. Students simply need to choose a career and the school lays out the necessary course work.

This study, however, does not provide a road map for which students are best suited for a two-year technical college versus a four-year college. The problem is the students in this study did not clearly know their own preferences until after they attended college. Each participant selected his or her first college for superficial reasons. Many freely admitted that nothing could have swayed them from attending a four-year school. To paraphrase politely, the participants

considered themselves young and uninformed. A common reaction to a problem at any level of education is to blame the previous level. For example, if large numbers of college students are dropping out, then high schools are blamed for not adequately advising students. While this prompts improvement in education, it does not seem to be a viable solution here. It is unlikely that additional counseling of the participants would have helped direct them to the best school. While encouraging more high school students to consider technical education is a positive step, advising alone is unlikely to overcome the social stigma surrounding technical education and the glorification of four-year colleges.

Instead, the findings of this study suggest that transferring schools in and of itself is not a negative act. None of the participants expressed significant negative issues in transferring from one school to another. I had anticipated at least some complaints over mounting student loans, difficulty transferring credits, or a longer time to reach their degree. Donald was the only participant with any significant recollection of his transfer experience, and his was positive. During Donald's first transfer, from a four-year school to another four-year school, he attended a special orientation for transfer students, which he found to be helpful. He was also placed in housing with other transfer students. The environment was very supportive.

The fact that the participants did not complain about the negative effects of transferring can be interpreted several ways. It could be that the technical college was particularly supportive of transfer students. However, neither positive nor negative views were expressed about the transfer process. When

asked directly about transferring to the technical college, the answers were ambivalent. A more likely explanation is any negative experiences were forgotten, especially after the students found success at the technical college. For the undergraduate reverse transfer students, completing a degree outweighed the negative impact of the transfer. Transferring was better than the alternative of suffering through a degree process or program that was not right for them or being a college dropout. The post-baccalaureate reverse transfer students were seeking new or additional career opportunities. They understood the college process and already had done a cost-benefit analysis before reentering college. If anything their experience alone made the process of transferring easier.

The overall effect of reverse transferring was clearly beneficial to these students. Initially they were unwilling to consider technical education as a graduating high school student. For the participants, attending multiple institutions was a clarifying experience. Through their experiences, students better understood what they wanted in both a college and a degree program. Advising students prior to attending college can only go so far. Given the low national graduation rate for first time college students, it is obviously difficult for students make choices about higher education. Despite our best efforts to steer students in the right direction, some students will need to discover what is best for them in a college by trial and error.

Transferring is more than simply changing schools. It is a process of learning through experience. At the same time, it provides a student time to mature and to gain non-school related experiences. When students reenrolled

they were proverbially older and wiser. This is partly a function of aging. Also, the time away from school gave them perspective as to what was important and why school was necessary. The participants of this study were not only in a college that better fit their needs and preferences, but they were motivated to work harder because they understood this.

Recommendations

Reverse transfer students defy the traditional higher education pathway. The participants in this study certainly challenged my assumptions about their success. The participants' experiences clearly raise questions about the wisdom of four-year education for all. Those of us in education must evaluate the ways we explicitly and implicitly encourage students to attend a four-year college. A more balanced approach must be implemented to get students to consider all collegiate options, including technical education.

The assumption that every successful high school student should go to a four-year college places a stigma on two-year technical education and drives away many students. We need to avoid placing a stigma on technical education and focus on the qualities of a school that best match the student. Regardless of students' performance in high school, success is difficult if the college is not the right fit. Students who view a college education as a means to a job should at the very least be encouraged to consider two-year technical education. Students who enjoy applied learning may also be well suited for a technical college. Students who lack a clear vision as to what they want from a college should also consider a two-year technical college. The shortened timetable and the laser like focus on

job preparation might provide some structure for such a student. Four-year colleges that emphasize exploration might not be the best fit for a student with little knowledge or understanding of what he or she wants.

The responsibility does not solely rest on the educators. Students put the pressure to attend four-year colleges on themselves. Most of the students in this study never considered two-year education, let alone technical education. Students need more than options and advice to select the correct schools; however, change of this nature is slow. It has taken decades to get to the point where most students feel obligated to get some form of college education. It will take decades more to see an increase in the number of students understanding the value of attending technical education.

Regardless of past performance, some students drop out of their first college. Students must be provided with more opportunity to explore colleges. Currently, colleges are motivated to retain students at their institution to secure tuition dollars. Despite strong incentives to retain, nationally, the graduation rate of first time college students remains low. To solve this problem the focus has been on the academic preparedness of students and the retention efforts of the college. Reverse transfer students reveal one more factor to this equation, the student-to-school match. Because so many students feel obligated to attend a four-year college and others are choosing a college for trivial reasons, an emphasis must be placed on allowing students to try multiple institutions. Furthermore, this effort might improve the overall graduation rates.

Major systematic changes might not be necessary. Schools could actively recruit college graduates and dropouts. The problem is they are not a captive group. Recruiting students to transfer is difficult. Unlike teenagers in a high school, potential transfer students are not all in one location, and they typically do not attend college fairs. Students who have dropped out are distributed throughout the work force or unemployed. Currently, the unemployed are aggressively sought after by colleges. As evidence, consider the high volume of television commercials for schools on daytime TV. Also, workforce-retraining programs frequently send people back to school. The students who never finished a degree and are employed would make the ideal candidate for the technical college.

Actively marketing to these students would provide technical colleges with more students and new revenue. Once again technical colleges' focus on career based education and short time table appeal to students of a nontraditional age. To sweeten the deal, technical colleges could offer lenient transfer credit policies and grant credits for work experience. Flexible class times must also be offered to make re-enrolling easier for these candidates. For high school students with strong academic strengths, institutional grants can be offered. Technical colleges may have an advantage in the recruitment of employed individuals. Because technical colleges are often associated with the companies in the industry for which they train, technical colleges could recruit employees at companies with tuition reimbursement plans. Another possibility is that technical colleges could develop customized training options for companies.

Marketing technical education to the employed will also encourage post-baccalaureate students to consider reverse transferring. If the results of this study are any indication, post-baccalaureate students might be looking to build their skill set or change their careers. This would expand the demographic from which technical colleges draw. Consider the experience of Donald combining a bachelor's degree in marketing with an associate's degree in web programming. Such combinations of degrees might help the student stand out when applying for a job, or increase the productivity of a company's workforce.

The biggest barrier to any transfer is the increased time for completion and the added cost of extra classes. Students are at the mercy of colleges' policies. A student's first college choice might require classes that do not transfer to other schools, or the transfer college might be reluctant to accept credits from some institutions. Colleges have every right to set their policies and do everything in their power to retain students. However, often students do not have enough knowledge, understanding, and maturity to choose a school that is best for them. In an ideal world more schools would work together to make transferring as easy as possible. This is difficult to mandate because schools are in direct competition. However, a four-year institution does not typically compete for the same students as a two-year technical college. An agreement between a four-year and two-year college to accept the other school's credits would be mutually beneficial. Students looking to upgrade an associate's degree to a bachelor's degree would be encouraged to attend the four-year college in exchange for the four-year college encouraging students looking to dropout to reverse transfer instead.

My ideas might be too idealistic. Schools will always have the incentive to retain tuition dollars. Sending students to a different college will always be seen as a loss. Most technical colleges are small compared to the average four-year school, so that will likely create an imbalance in favor of the technical college. Federal and state governments have a broad enough perspective to change the incentive structure more in the students favor, and government has a very powerful tool, financial aid. Student debt is a major concern today, especially for those who have not completed their degree or those who are unable to find sustainable employment with their degree. Dropouts and the underemployed have a harder time paying back loans. The government could potentially forgive some or all of a loan from the first college if the student graduates and is able to pay the debt on the new loan. Colleges would still have an incentive to provide the best educational experience possible to retain as many students as they can. In fact, with students having more flexibility to change schools, schools will have an even greater incentive. At the same time students would have the freedom to find the college that is the best match for them.

Furthermore, businesses that require college-educated employees can understand the fact that students may need to attend multiple institutions. Companies have benefitted greatly from the education of their employees but have taken on very little risk. More companies should support students going back to school. Technical education seems like a logical place to send employees because of the shorter time frame and the job specific training that could even be customized to the companies needs. A business would benefit from highly

educated and skilled employees. The technical colleges would benefit from increased enrollment. Students would benefit from increased promotion and job opportunities. Because a company would incur the risk of an employee not graduating, not gaining skills, or becoming skilled enough to find different employment, the technical college would need to provide some incentives. Such incentives could include reduced tuition or customized training.

More colleges could offer certificates that build toward a degree. This is again something that a technical college is more suited for. A student who attends at least one term could learn a specific employable skill. As the student transfers from one college to another that student can earn certificates while exploring which college is best for him or her. While the certificates between colleges might not build up to a degree, the student can return to the preferred school and complete a degree there. At least this way the first college experience does not become a complete waste for the transferring student because he or she received an employable skill.

The findings of this study support reverse transferring as a means of increasing the overall graduation rate of students, supporting the employment goals of individuals and companies, and encouraging the mission of technical education. However, these facts raise the concern that accepting reverse transfer students will crowd out the traditional technical college population. Technical colleges traditionally have served students unable to attend a four-year college for academic or financial reasons. This tradition should be maintained. Two-year technical colleges should set quotas for themselves to have student populations

that are no more than fifty percent reverse transfer students. This will allow technical colleges to continue serving its traditional population. However, adding additional reverse transfer students can potentially improve the performance of traditional technical college students if the reverse transfer students take on a supportive roll such as tutoring.

Limitations of the Study

This study has a few glaring limitations. The extremely small sample size suggests the results must be tempered. Insights gained from seven students at one technical college should not necessarily be universally applied. Instead, the results from this study suggest future research. A nationwide study needs to be conducted to determine if students who reverse transfer to a technical college perform any differently than those who reverse transfer to any two-year college. Another avenue for future research would be to look into the long-term effects of transferring laterally as compared to reverse transferring. This study seems to suggest that it is better to graduate with an alternate degree than continue to attempt to earn a four-year degree. A much larger study is required to determine the plausibility of this assertion.

The selective sampling also presents a problem for this study. The participants were identified because they were already successful at a technical college. It is unclear if a majority of reverse transfer students at technical colleges have such a positive experience. Future research to advance this topic should include random samples of reverse transfer students starting at a technical college to understand the broader population.

Finally, the perspectives of the participants in this study are not tested. This study assumes that the perspectives of the reverse transfer students are comprehensive and accurate. Given human nature, this is almost certainly not true. While the perspectives of students may provide a detailed description of a few reverse transfer students experience, quantitative studies would be required to test if these perspectives are accurate in the broader population or if there are other correlated factors that are not obvious to the students.

Self-Reflection

The most exciting part of this process for me was the idea that I could create new theory and knowledge. Albeit a small contribution, I was motivated by the idea that I could add to the vast body of literature and understanding. I was passionate about my topic, this more than any other factor kept me going throughout this process. My research will certainly not change the world, but I am proud to say that I was able to contribute something positive. I am thankful for the opportunity that this project has presented and to all those who motivated me along the way.

This experience has taught me a valuable lesson about how I learn and process information. Despite the advice I received from former English teachers, I do not formulate my ideas before I write them down. I rarely outline, and my first drafts look a lot like my final drafts. I used to think this was because I was just plain lazy. Instead, I have come to realize that I process information and learn through writing my thoughts on paper. Until I am forced to produce my ideas onto a tangible format, they do not fully exist. I never completely know where my ideas will go until I get there. While this method might be unconventional and likely means that I will never be a best-selling writer, it explains why the act of creating new ideas appeals to me.

My view of education has changed immensely through my interactions with students. Like many of the participants of this study, I went to college because I had nothing better to do and going to college is what eighteen-year-olds do. I viewed the role of college as being twofold: colleges shape students into

valuable members of society and colleges act as one giant test that tells others that you can learn. I did not see it at the time; however, my education provided me with something far more basic and practical, skills for a vocation. As an instructor at a technical college, my students made me realize that most people go to school to get a better job or learn a new skill, and that this should not be looked down upon. Education must also be pragmatic.

Conducting original research represents another evolution in my view of education. I now see education as creation, much like an inventor or an artist. This can be done formally through research studies like this one; however, it should happen for both student and instructor every day in every classroom. I tell my students that the irony of education is that the person who learns the most is the teacher. Through teaching I have gained a deeper understanding of the content I teach, the process of learning, and human nature. Even when the subject is static and well established, learning is producing something that did not exist before in the mind of both student and teacher. I feel honored to be a part of this process for others, and I am committed to always approaching life as a student.

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